

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of this Statement of Commitment and Understanding?

As you have seen in recent extensive media coverage, personal, potentially sensitive information on over 26 million veterans and some family members was stolen from a VA employee when his home was burglarized.

Veterans entrust VA employees with extensive medical, financial, and other personal data, and rely on the integrity of our staff and of our security procedures to protect that information, and to ensure that VA properly protects their personal information. The confidence in the safety of their private data has been seriously damaged by the recent data breach. It is important that we demonstrate to America's veterans that we understand our responsibilities to them, and that we are re-dedicating ourselves to this effort. We cannot accomplish our mission of providing services to our veterans if we do not have their complete confidence that we will use their information properly to provide them with the services and benefits they have earned.

Does signing this statement impose any new obligations on me beyond those which already apply?

No. The Statement does not impose any new obligations on employees, or subject them to any new penalties. All VA employees must already comply with the Privacy Act and other confidentiality requirements. These statutes and regulations make employees subject to possible fines or imprisonment for improperly using or disclosing information. Signing the Statement does not change or increase the employee's responsibilities or liabilities.

The Statement is an effort to demonstrate to America's veterans that we take our obligation seriously to treat their personal information carefully. Although it is helpful to state what we do as a Department as a matter of policy, we believe it will be more effective if each of us, as employees who actually deliver the services and benefits to veterans, sign the Statement essentially confirming that:

- We already are required to be trained on our responsibilities for protecting veterans information;
- We already are subject to the penalties contained in the Laws governing Privacy; and
- We are committed to maintaining the confidentiality of their personal data.

I do not have routine or regular access to veteran's data in my job. Do I still have to sign the Statement?

Even employees who do not have routine or regular access to veteran data may hear confidential information. A veteran may tell you something about his or her medical condition or claim, or you may be assisting a veteran who tells someone else about his or her medical condition. You may find information which was lost or misplaced. You are responsible for ensuring the confidentiality of veteran information in any of these or similar situations.

Frequently Asked Questions

So, as noted above, it is important that veterans can rely on the fact that EVERY VA employee understands the sensitivity of veterans' personal information, and that each employee is committed to protecting it within the scope of his or her personal responsibility.

In the Statement of Commitment and Understanding, I must certify I have taken the General Privacy Act Training. I have not taken that course, but have viewed the video entitled "*Privacy: It's Everyone's Business.*" Does that satisfy the requirement?

VA has developed several training vehicles to help employees understand the regulations and statutes governing the use and disclosure of veterans' personal data. Our objective is to protect employees from any of the penalties contained in the applicable confidentiality statutes and regulations, as well as to ensure veterans', employees' and applicants' data is not compromised. Accordingly, completion of any of the following training modules will satisfy the requirement:

- General Privacy Awareness Training (online course)
- VHA Privacy Course (online course)
- VHA Provider Privacy Training (video)
- Privacy: It's Everyone's Business (video)

I do not have access to a computer at work. How do I complete the VA Cyber-Security Training?

The VA Cyber Security Awareness Training may be taken by hard copy. Contact your facility Information Security Officer (ISO) or Privacy Officer to obtain a copy.

You may also take this training by video.

The Statement of Commitment and Understanding states that I may obtain additional information from the local Privacy Officer or a number of other individuals--how can I find out who these employees are at my workplace?

Your immediate supervisor can help you identify the local Privacy Officer and other individuals responsible for implementing or enforcing confidentiality laws and regulations. Senior Management at Regional Offices, Medical Centers and Clinics and National Cemeteries are being directed to put the names, locations and phone numbers for these individuals at local sites. Our goal is to make it easy for employees to contact knowledgeable staff and obtain assistance quickly when they have questions concerning sensitive data or information. We want to avoid placing employees at risk, and we want to help them safeguard sensitive data.

Frequently Asked Questions

I find the penalties outlined in The Statement of Commitment and Understanding to be intimidating. Do I have to sign the document?

Yes. ALL employees are being asked to sign the form, as part of the Department's effort to regain the trust of our veterans.

If you have any reservation in signing the form you can state that reservation under your signature. If you do not sign your statement, your supervisor will note on the statement that you were given an opportunity but declined to sign the statement.

While all employees are encouraged to sign the statement, you will not be disciplined for declining to sign.

It is important to note that all employees are already covered by the applicable confidentiality statutes and regulations and are subject to the penalties contained in those laws. An employee cannot avoid liability under the laws and regulations by not signing the Statement.

If employees are already covered by the responsibilities penalties contained in the confidentiality statutes and regulations, and have been required to take both The General Privacy Awareness and Cyber Security Awareness Training for the past several years, why do we have to sign the Statement?

As you can see from the question itself, the only new requirement in the Statement is that each employee certifies that he or she is committed to protecting sensitive data from improper use or disclosure. We feel this is a powerful statement for VA to make to our veterans in light of recent events. We believe that VA employees will be proud to declare their commitment to protect the personal information entrusted to VA. We appreciate your cooperation and support in making this Statement of Commitment and Understanding to the nation's veterans.

When do volunteers, students, trainees and contractors need to sign the Statement of Commitment and Understanding?

These individuals need to complete the form by September 30, 2006. The guidelines for not signing this document will be the same as for other employees.

Frequently Asked Questions

Will special provisions be made for those individuals who do not have access for a computer at work? How will they complete the VA Cyber-Security Training?

As with other employees, this training maybe be taken by hard copy or may be taken using video. Both the hard copy and the video for VA Cyber-Security Awareness Training will be sent to each medical center by the Office of the Deputy of USH for Operations and Management.

Office of Human Resources and Administration
July 2006